DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 447 922 PS 029 019

AUTHOR	Fielden, Frank, Ed.
TITLE	Of Primary Interest, 1999-2000.
INSTITUTION	National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education.
PUB DATE	2000-00-00
NOTE	18p.; For 1998-1999 issues, see ED 438 916. Published cooperatively with the Iowa Department of Education, Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Montana Office of Public Instruction, Nebraska Department of Education, and the North Carolina Office of Public Instruction.
AVAILABLE FROM	Colorado Department of Education, 201 East Colfax Avenue, Denver, CO 80203; Tel: 303-866-6674; Fax: 303-866-6857. For full text: http://ericps.crc.uiuc.edu/naecs/opi-nl.html.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT	Of Primary Interest; v7 n1-4 Win 1999-Fall 2000
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Day Care Effects; Educational Practices; Educational Trends; Grade 2; *Kindergarten; Literacy; Looping (Teachers); Primary Education; *School Readiness; Social Promotion; Student Placement
IDENTIFIERS	Day Care Quality; *Looping (Teachers)

ABSTRACT

This document is comprised of four consecutive issues (Winter 1999-Fall 2000) of a newsletter providing information on current research and practice to professionals teaching in the primary grades. The newsletter is published by the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE); participating states are Iowa, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, and North Carolina. The winter 1999 issue contains articles on: (1) looping; (2) the impact of high-quality preschool child care on second-grade outcomes; and (3) second-grade literacy accomplishments. The spring 2000 issue contains articles on: (1) how the quality of child care affects children's success in primary grades; (2) social promotion; and (3) assessing a state's efforts to improve children's readiness for school. The summer-fall 2000 issue provides a position statement from the NAECS/SDE on unacceptable trends in kindergarten entry and placement. (EV)

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Of Primary Interest, 1999-2000

Volume 7, Numbers 1-4

Winter 1999-Fall 2000

Frank Fielden, Editor

PS 029 019

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Of Primary Interest

Published by the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education • **Winter 1999 Vol. 7 No. 1**

Looping: Adding Time, Strengthening Relationships

Daniel L. Burke

"Looping" is an essentially simple concept: a teacher moves with his or her students to the next grade level, rather than sending them to another teacher at the end of the school year (Grant et al., 1996). Some loops are two consecutive years with the same group of students, while others may be three or more years with the same group. Despite enthusiastic practitioners, the experience of European school systems, and favorable research, looping is still uncommon enough in the United States to be considered *innovative* (Burke, 1996).

The available literature on looping is replete with its benefits. Students change from one grade to the next with a minimum of anxiety (Grant & Johnson, 1995). Looping provides children with additional time to build the relationships on which much of children's learning depends (Checkley, 1995; Haslinger, Kelly, & O'Lare, 1996; Lincoln, 1997; Shepro, 1995). Looping can turn parents into supporters and promotes stronger bonding between parents and teachers (National School Public Relations Association, 1995; Shepro, 1995). Looping essentially adds an extra month of teaching/learning time during the second year when the typical transitional period at the beginning of the year is virtually unnecessary (Hanson, 1995; Burke, 1996).

Practitioners' Perspectives

In Project F.A.S.T. (Families Are Students and Teachers), implemented in East Cleveland, Ohio, schools report dramatic effects on both student academic achievement and parental involvement as a result of the "extended family" aspect of looping (Hampton, Mumford, & Bond, 1997). Jacoby (1994) chronicles how her early fears of looping were quickly replaced with gratitude—she describes the time saved in skill assessment, deeper relationships developed with both students and parents, and the particular benefits afforded shy students. For teachers Mazzuchi and Brooks (1992), looping's "gift of time" is its most beneficial aspect. Teachers are able to provide appropriate activities over the longer two-year period to students who need to master certain basic skills. Jubert (1996) considers looping a parallel to a "close-knit family," and the additional month of learning at the beginning of year two, one of the "greatest benefits."

Oxley (1994) recommends dividing large schools into smaller, cross-disciplinary units, with students and teachers staying together for several years. She cites two examples of schools that have successfully utilized extended teacher–student relationships. Ziegler (1993) discusses teacher-advisory groups that remain together for three school years in grades seven through nine. She includes studies suggesting that such groups promote positive attitudes within student, teacher, and parent populations. George and Alexander (1993) argue that for middle-school students, who generally need a supportive interpersonal structure, a multi-year teacher–student assignment is highly beneficial. A looping classroom with an effective summer component also offers benefits similar to those of year-round schools with respect to momentum and continuity of instruction (Grant et al., 1996; Lincoln, 1997).

Looping essentially adds an extra month of teaching/ learning time during the second year.

European Experiences

Italian preschools, considered by some the best in the world, utilize a model of three-year assignments of students to teachers, and both parents and teachers as team members (Palestis, 1994). Some German schools utilize multi-year teacher–student groupings for as long as six years, and credit the extended relationship time with assisting students in making the necessary brain connections learning requires (Burke, 1996; Oxley, 1994; Zahorik & Dichanz, 1994). Barnes (1980) describes Waldorf education, which originated in Central Europe over 70 years ago and was brought to the United States in 1928, as a similar concept. In Waldorf education settings, one teacher and the same group of students remain together from grade one through grade eight.

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PS 029019

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Research

East Cleveland, Ohio, Schools and Cleveland State University teamed to pilot Project F.A.S.T., which included multi-year teacher–student assignments as a primary program component (Hampton, Mumford, & Bond, 1997). Students in the program exhibited substantially higher reading and mathematics achievement scores on standardized tests than did students in the traditional grade organization, even when both groups were taught *by the same teacher*. In addition to student academic gains, F.A.S.T. teachers reported an increased sense of ownership for student outcomes (both positive and negative), and a heightened sense of efficacy as a result of their increased decision-making autonomy for students. Parents reported feeling more respected by teachers, having more confidence in their children's teachers and administrators, and being more likely to seek the school's assistance with their children.

Studying a three-year teacher–student relationship, George, Spreul, and Moorefield (1987) found that approximately 70% of the teachers reported that teaching the same students for three years allowed them to use more positive approaches to classroom management. Ninety-two percent of them said that they knew more about their students, and 69% described their students as more willing to participate voluntarily in class. Eighty-five percent of the teachers reported that their students were better able to see themselves as important members of a group, to feel pride in that group, and to feel pride in the school as a whole. Eighty-four percent of the teachers reported more positive relationships with parents, and 75% reported increased empathy with colleagues. The reactions of students in this study were equally favorable and grew more positive with each successive grade level. Ninety-nine percent of the parents in this study, when asked, requested that their child have the same teacher as the previous year (Burke, 1996).

Milburn (1981) studied two elementary schools of similar socioeconomic areas, which were not experiencing major problems. One school used a traditional grade-level structure, and the other used an extended teacher–student relationship approach where students remained with the same teacher for more than one year. This study found that students in the extended relationship school were less likely to report disliking school or to find it "boring." Additionally, the young students in the extended relationship school outperformed their counterparts in the traditional school on basic skills tests.

Conclusion

The practice of looping offers the potential for both academic and social benefits for students. Academically, the literature includes (a) reports of improved student achievement; (b) increased time-on-task through the "extra month" of school during year two of a loop, and the potential for summer learning at the end of year one with the assignment of high interest reading and project activities; (c) more time for slower students to learn basic skills without the need for retention; and (d) more opportunities for bonding between teachers and students, and teachers and parents. The potential social benefits for students include (a) diminished apprehension about a new school year; (b) more time to establish positive peer relationships; (c) increased support for students who require school as a social safety net; (d) an enhanced sense of school and group as a "community"; and (e) increased opportunities for shy students to develop self-confidence. The only potential disadvantage of looping regularly mentioned is an inappropriate match, or personality conflict, between teacher and student—a situation that can occur in a traditional classroom as well. Such actual problems are rare (Burke, 1996) and can usually be solved by transferring those students to another teacher (Grant & Johnson, 1995).

The social interactions among adults and students are not simply a means to some other end; rather "they are education itself" (Lee et al., 1993). The essence of looping is the promotion of strong, extended, meaningful, positive interpersonal relationships between teachers and students that foster increased student motivation and, in turn, stimulate improved learning outcomes for students.

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Quality Preschool Child Care Impacts Second Grade Outcomes

In recent years there has been increasing interest in the effects of preschool experiences—especially child care—on children's later performance in school. A substantial majority of preschoolers now participate in some form of child care before coming to school. The **Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers Study**, begun in 1993, was designed in part to examine the influence of typical center-based child care on children's development during their preschool years and then subsequently as they moved into the formal elementary education system. The **Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study** has now followed these children through the end of second grade, four years after the researchers' initial contact with them when they were nearing the end of their next-to-last year in child care.

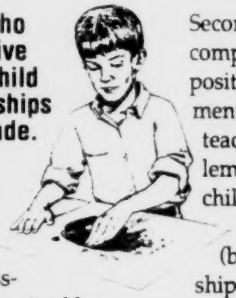
Second Grade Findings

One set of findings answered questions about the extent to which child care experiences affected children's abilities four years later, after considering the effects of subsequent experiences during this time period. These analyses examined children's outcomes in the second grade, also taking into account background characteristics. The first finding considered the quality of children's classroom experiences in kindergarten and second grade, while the second finding considered previous problem behaviors and child care and second grade teachers' ratings of teacher–child closeness and conflict.

Finding One: Children who attended higher quality child care had better cognitive and social skills in the second grade, even after taking into account kindergarten and second grade classroom experiences.

Child care quality during the preschool years was related to children's cognitive and social skills in the second grade, after considering background characteristics and the quality of subsequent experiences in kindergarten and second grade. As with the longitudinal findings, children's math skills related to child care classroom practices, while children's classroom behavior (thinking/attention skills, problem behavior, and sociability) related to child care teacher–child closeness. Similarly, better quality child care was more strongly related to fewer problem behaviors in second grade for children with less highly educated mothers. Children's language and letter–word recognition skills in the second grade were not related to child care quality.

Finding Two: Children who experienced more positive classroom climates in child care had better relationships with peers in second grade.



Children rated higher on aggressive and disruptive behavior in the second grade were more likely to have been in child care classrooms with climates characterized by high levels of problem behaviors and low levels of teacher–child closeness. Similarly, higher ratings of social withdrawal in second grade were associated with child care classrooms characterized by high levels of problem behaviors. Children's prosocial behaviors in second grade, on the other hand, were predicted by child care classrooms that involved greater peer interaction during play.

Discussion of Second Grade Findings

Children's cognitive and social competence in second grade can be predicted by the experiences they had four years previously in child care, after taking into account subsequent experiences in elementary school. While there was some evidence of an effect of child care quality on children's math achievement, most of the effect was seen in the social domain, in terms of second grade classroom behavior and peer relationships. The findings of a long-term influence of child care experiences on children's second grade outcomes are notable for two reasons.

The effects of child care quality on children's second grade outcomes hold after considering subsequent classroom experiences.

First, from their next-to-last year in child care through second grade (ages 4 to 8), children have experienced a variety of care and education settings, including the transitions to and experiences in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade. The findings of influences of child care quality on second grade outcomes, despite the variety of subsequent experiences, suggests the long-term importance of early experiences on children's development.

The social–emotional climates of child care classrooms as well as individual children's relationships with their teachers are important predictors of children's outcomes.

Second, the results indicated that social competence with peers was related to positive child care classroom environments (i.e., classrooms with close teacher–child relationships, low problem behaviors, and opportunities for children to play together) in addition to positive teacher–child relationships (both current and earlier relationships). These findings suggest that child care classrooms provide an environment for children to establish patterns of relationships that persist over time and over the transition into elementary school.

The longitudinal and second grade findings mirror one another. The longitudinal findings provide evidence for the effects of child care quality on children's patterns of growth and development from the preschool years through the early elementary years. Correspondingly, the second grade findings provide evidence for the long-term effects of child care experiences on children's abilities four years later, after considering the effects of subsequent educational experiences between child care and second grade. Both sets of findings reveal that children who have more positive child care experiences during the preschool years have better outcomes through the elementary school years, after controlling for differences in background characteristics. Whether child care experiences are examined in terms of the global quality of classroom practices, the nature of teacher–child relationships, or the social–emotional climate, more positive experiences are related to better outcomes in both social and cognitive domains.

The above information is excerpted from the Executive Summary of **The Children of the Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study Go To School**, June 1999. The summary and other information about the project are available on the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center website <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~NCEDL/PAGES/cqes.htm>. Researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, University of California at Los Angeles, and Yale University conducted the study.

Second-Grade Literacy Accomplishments

Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (1998) and **Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success** (1999) present highlights of literacy acquisition, sets of accomplishments that the successful learner should exhibit by the end of each of the primary grades. Although the timing of these accomplishments will vary among children, they are the sorts of things that should be in place before entering the next grade. Accomplishments for a second-grader include:

- Reads and comprehends both fiction and nonfiction that is appropriately designed for grade level.
- Accurately decodes orthographically regular, multisyllable words and nonsense words (e.g., capital, Kalamazoo).
- Uses knowledge of print–sound mappings to sound out unknown words.
- Accurately reads many irregularly spelled words and such spelling patterns as diphthongs, special vowel spellings, and common word endings.
- Reads and comprehends both fiction and nonfiction that is appropriately designed for the grade.
- Shows evidence of expanding language repertory, including increasing use of more formal language registers.
- Reads voluntarily for interest and own purposes.
- Rereads sentences when meaning is not clear.
- Interprets information from diagrams, charts, and graphs.
- Recalls facts and details of texts.
- Reads nonfiction materials for answers to specific questions or specific purposes.
- Takes part in creative responses to texts such as dramatizations, oral presentations, fantasy play, etc.
- Discusses similarities in characters and events across stories.
- Connects and compares information across nonfiction selections.
- Poses possible answers to how, why, and what-if questions.
- Correctly spells previously studied words and spelling patterns in own writing.
- Represents the complete sound of a word when spelling independently.
- Shows sensitivity to using formal language patterns in place of oral language patterns at appropriate spots in own writing (e.g., de-contextualizing sentences, conventions for quoted speech, literacy language forms, proper verb forms).

- Makes reasonable judgments about what to include in written products.
- Productively discusses ways to clarify and refine own writing and that of others.
- With assistance, adds use of conferencing, revision, and editing processes to clarify and refine own writing to the steps of the expected parts of the writing process.
- Given organizational help, writes informative, well-structured reports.
- Attends to spelling, mechanics, and presentation for final products.
- Produces a variety of types of compositions (e.g., stories, reports, correspondence).

The above excerpt is reprinted with permission from **Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success**. Copies of the entire publication are available from the National Academy Press, 2101 Constitution Avenue, NW, Lockbox 285, Washington, DC 20055, (800) 624-6242, at a cost of $14.95 per book. The report is also available online at <http://www.nap.edu>.

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Of Primary Interest

Published by the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education • **Spring 2000 Vol. 7 No. 2**

Quality Child Care Affects Children's Success in Primary Grades

In recent years there has been increasing interest in the effects of preschool experiences—especially child care—on children's later performance in school. A substantial majority of preschoolers now participate in some form of child care before coming to school. The **Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers Study**, begun in 1993, was designed in part to examine the influence of typical center-based child care on children's development during their preschool years and then subsequently as they moved into the formal elementary education system. The **Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study** has now followed these children through the end of second grade, four years after the researchers' initial contact with them when they were nearing the end of their next-to-last year in child care

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(Refer to *Of Primary Interest*, Volume 7, Number 1, Winter 1999).

Implications for Policy and Practice

There is one overarching implication from this study—**if America wants all its children to be ready for school, it must improve the quality of child care experiences available in this country**. The first phase of the study indicated that the majority of children in child care do not have access to the level of quality recommended by child care professionals. The current phase of research shows that this lack of quality care is having negative effects on children's readiness for school and on their development during the early school years. Improving child care quality in the US will require a broad array of efforts including attention from federal, state and local officials in Education, Health and Human Services, and related agencies as well as the private sector. Below is a list of a number of suggested ways of working toward the goal of high quality child care. These suggestions are broken down into three broad categories—fiscal strategies, professional preparation/compensation approaches, and program/system improvements.

Fiscal Strategies

The first phase of the study demonstrated the link between the cost of services and the quality of care received by children in typical child care centers in the US. In order to raise the quality of care, attention needs to be given to the financing of child care.

- Increased investments in child care from both the public and private sector are needed. While progress has been made over the past decade, greater effort will be required to raise quality to the level called for in this report.
- The quality set aside in the federal and state funds for child care is a wise investment and should be extended. A broad examination of the use of the quality set aside should be undertaken to ensure that efforts are targeted to improving the quality of services as originally intended. The funds available for quality improvements should be expanded.

Lack of quality care is having negative effects on children's readiness for school and on their development during the early school years.

- Child care subsidies should be redesigned to offer incentives for providing high quality care. Subsidy systems can be reconfigured to tie subsidy payments to higher program standards and to provide higher compensation for teachers. Such approaches to subsidy systems provide good opportunities for improving the quality of care in all states.
- Tax incentives should encourage use of higher quality care and education. The current federal and state tax credits have ceilings so low that families purchasing high quality child care get tax credits for only a fraction of the real cost of services.

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Quality Child Care continued from page 1

These incentives encourage parents to choose the lowest cost services available, which are often of lower quality as well.

Professional Preparation and Compensation Approaches

Findings of the first phase of the study suggest that the training and compensation of teachers who work in early care and education settings are important areas to target for improving quality. The research indicated that the quality of child care was related to both the formal educational levels and the specialized early childhood training of the classroom teachers. Similarly, teacher compensation was closely linked to the quality of services in child care. The findings reported further underline the need to raise quality, indicating that these **child care experiences continue to influence children's development through the early elementary years.**

- Regulations at the state level should call for much higher minimum levels of training for teachers than are currently in place. Formal training is a key element for teacher preparation and should be required such as through some form of credentialing comparable to the K-12 system.
- A major new initiative to support teacher preparation programs should be implemented, similar to the federal initiatives to improve professional preparation for teachers working with young children with disabilities. In particular, teacher preparation programs should include a greater focus on helping teachers develop skills in relationship building with young children.
- Inservice training is also important in building a high quality early childhood system. The current systems of training and technical assistance available to Head Start programs and programs serving children with disabilities could be used as models for extending support services to all early childhood programs in the country.
- Teacher compensation issues are important to address so that these training initiatives will produce long-term improvements in child care quality. As reported in phase one findings, teacher salaries are so low that trained teachers leave the early childhood field in great numbers, resulting in overall lower levels of teacher qualifications and child care quality.

System and Program Change Strategies

Adequate improvement in the quality of care is unlikely to occur without improvements in the entire system. Attention should be paid to the infrastructure, including the regulatory system in states, the expanded use of program accreditation, and development of broader professional preparation opportunities.

While child care experiences are important, they are not the only determining factor in children's success. We should not hold hopes that high quality child care will forever erase the major disadvantages some children face as they come to school.

- Recent comprehensive attempts by states to provide preschool care and education experiences for children are well founded and should be greatly expanded. The results of the study support policies focusing on early childhood care and education as a means of improving children's chances of being ready for school.
- Programs which are accredited by national accrediting agencies tend to have higher quality. Efforts to expand use of such accrediting could prove useful in overall efforts to raise the quality of child care.
- In order to improve the level of education and specialized training of child care teachers called for in the previous section, improvements and expansion of the teacher preparation systems will be needed.
- States should focus on improving licensing standards as a means of raising quality. As indicated in the first phase of this study, improvements in regulation of child care can have a positive impact on quality. Child care policies which keep regulations at a minimum and exempt categories of providers from regulation to help expand supply, encourage the use of lower quality informal and unregulated care and are harmful to children.

In closing, two important issues must be noted. Providing quality early childhood programs is not only about better cognitive and social outcomes for young children, but also about providing opportunities for a good life for them while they are in the child care setting. The findings in phase one indicated that children actually liked better the programs that were rated higher in quality than those rated lower. So the programs which have been defined as higher in quality are seen by the children themselves as preferable. It is too easy to leave their concerns for a good life out of our thinking about what is needed. Second, it is important to note that the impact of child care quality on children's success in the early years of school is modest. While child care experiences are important, they are not the only determining factor in children's success. We should not hold hopes that high quality child care will forever erase the major disadvantages some children face as they come to school. The study emphasizes that while we must be realistic in what we promise, we need to promote efforts to improve the quality of early care and education experiences to enable all children to be ready to learn and succeed in school.

The above information is excerpted from the Executive Summary of **The Children of the Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study Go To School**, June 1999. The summary and other information about the project are available on the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center website <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~NCEDL/PAGES/cqes.htm>. Researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, University of California at Los Angeles, and Yale University conducted the study.

A Note on Social Promotion

William Romey

The flag bearing the motto "End social promotion" is now being raised by President Clinton, by several governors, and by numerous other politicians. But the movement they are helping to create has many pernicious implications. The real problem in deciding whether or not to promote students from one grade to the next is the existence of grade levels in the first place. As long as we continue to accept that schools must be organized into archaic grade levels, the problem of promotion will plague us.

We need to change our basic assumptions. If, as I believe, an important tenet of any educator's "Hippocratic Oath" is "First, do no harm," then we must challenge the whole concept of "promotion." Both promoting and not promoting students can do grievous harm. You can't win either way.

Given the wide differences in developmental stages of children at any given age, it is ludicrous for schools to use chronological age to place children into groups that move in lock step on yearlong schedules. "Retaining" a child who hasn't passed a certain level at the end of June isn't really "retention" at all. It's moving the child clear back to the beginning of the year he or she has "failed" rather than working with the individual child at his or her actual level of achievement. You couldn't construct a better way to bore a child to tears while at the same time administering a vicious slap in the face for being slower at acquiring some particular skill than some other children in the age group. The eventual dropout rate among children who have been held back is much higher than among children who have not suffered the indignity of repeating a grade.

A few institutions have been wise enough to develop "continuous progress" programs for children in each subject area. These include such places as the open schools that people like Joe Nathan, a frequent contributor to this journal, pioneered in Minnesota; the Montessori schools that some of my grandchildren have attended; and at least a few of today's new charter schools. A child who can't read at a certain level in June isn't moved back to the curriculum of the previous September: same books, same exercises, possibly the same teacher (where the problem may lie in the first place).

When September arrives, a child who might have been retained continues with work at a level perhaps equivalent to the "average" student's achievement in the previous December or March. Nothing is "repeated"; all is merely continued.

The same practice holds true for math, science (the area in which I have been involved in some work on standards), history, geography, the arts, and music. There's a pretty good chance that a student who is "deficient" (as defined by foolish, pernicious year-end "levels") in reading may be "ahead" of other students in music, geography, understanding of cultural situations, or some other area. In the best schools, when parents wish to have their children remain with other children of more or less the same chronological age, the students who are more advanced in reading may, by helping less advanced students, advance their own skills even more and deepen their own learning by helping their peers.

Guardians of the status quo will object that such individualized, continuous-progress approaches to education are too expensive to administer or that they might penalize or hold back more "gifted" students. I counter that we can't afford to do less than develop these approaches if we ever want to solve what unimaginative educators and politicians see as the "problem of social promotion." It is a problem only because we have created it ourselves by the way we have structured our schools. I see great hope in such places as the charter school that one of my granddaughters just completed.

There is no hope in holding students back for whole-year repeats. If it doesn't work the first time, doing the same year's work over again from scratch—in all subjects, in the same way—is certain to fail again in the long run. Children do not develop in nine-month bursts—except during gestation. Their intellectual development is a continuous process that demands attention to the individual rather than to artificially constructed averages, groups, and standards measured like fiscal years. We should make no assumptions about what the position of a student should be within a group. Rather, we must see that each student learns to read, write, do math, and develop scientific literacy at his or her own rate with no year-end barriers or time-wasting standardized achievement tests to impede what is clearly a continuous process of development.

Romey on Social Promotion

As long as we continue to accept that schools must be organized into archaic grade levels, the problem of promotion will plague us.

Both promoting and not promoting students can do grievous harm. You can't win either way.

Given the wide differences in developmental stages of children at any given age, it is ludicrous for schools to use chronological age to place children into groups that move in lock step on yearlong schedules.

You couldn't construct a better way to bore a child to tears while at the same time administering a vicious slap in the face.

It is a problem only because we have created it ourselves by the way we have structured our schools.

Children do not develop in nine-month bursts—except during gestation.

The above article appeared in the April 2000 issue of **Phi Delta Kappan**, 81 (8), 632, and is reprinted with the permission of the magazine and the author. William Romey is a professor emeritus of geography at St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York. He may be reached at <wromey@capecod.net>.

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Improving Children's Readiness For School: How is Your State Doing?

David R. Denton

Policy-makers who want to assess their states' efforts to prepare all children for first grade should ask several questions about the key issues:

Prekindergarten and kindergarten programs

- Is full-day kindergarten available to all 5-year-olds in the state?
- Are there enough spaces in Head Start and/or a state prekindergarten program to serve all 3- and 4-year-olds living in poverty?
- Are program standards for the state prekindergarten program high enough to ensure its quality?

Support for parents and families

- Is the state helping parents of at-risk children to be more effective as their children's first teachers?
- Are prekindergarten and kindergarten programs required to involve parents in decisions about their children's education?
- Are educational, social, and health services family-friendly, readily accessible and coordinated to ensure maximum effectiveness?

Assessment and early intervention

- Are there appropriate assessment programs to ensure that all children with potential problems are identified by the time they begin first grade?
- Do these assessments provide information for teachers and administrators to use in making decisions about each child's needs?
- Are effective early-intervention programs available to help all children who are not ready to begin school?

Child health

- Is enough being done to ensure that all children receive all recommended immunizations by age 3?
- Are there effective outreach programs to bring uninsured children into the new health-insurance programs for children?
- Do all children covered by Medicaid or other health-insurance programs for children have access to health care services?

Bottom line

- Does the state emphasize cost-effective early-intervention programs for younger children as opposed to more costly, less effective remedial programs—and even incarceration—for older youths and adults?

The above article is contained in the Southern Regional Education Board's report **Getting Children Ready for the First Grade** (March 2000, p. 19) and is reprinted with SREB's permission. David R. Denton is SREB's Director of Health and Human Services and may be contacted at the Southern Regional Education Board, 592 10th Street, NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30318, (404) 875-9211, <www.sreb.org>.

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Of Primary Interest

Published by the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education • **Summer & Fall 2000 Vol. 7 No. 3 & 4**

STILL Unacceptable Trends in Kindergarten Entry and Placement

A position statement developed by the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education

2000 Revision and Update

Introduction

The **National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE)** is a national organization of early childhood specialists who work in state education agencies. The goals of the organization are:

- to enhance the efforts of the State Departments of Education on behalf of young children;
- to strengthen communication and coordination among states;
- to influence and support policies and legislation that affect the education, health, and welfare of children and their families;
- to offer assistance and leadership in researching, analyzing, and recommending standards for quality early childhood and teacher preparation programs; and
- to promote communication and coordination between State Departments of Education and other agencies and professional organizations serving young children.

For several years, members of the association representing all sections of the country have observed with concern the persistence of practices which narrow the curriculum in kindergarten and primary education, constrict equal educational opportunity for some children, and curtail the exercise of professional responsibility of early childhood educators.

This position statement on entry and placement in kindergarten reflects those concerns. It is based upon current research as well as the experiences and expertise of **NAECS/SDE** members. **NAECS/SDE** offers this position paper in an effort to increase public awareness about educational policies and practices affecting young children. Our hope is that it will serve as a catalyst for change at local, state, and national levels.

Overview of Position Statement

For the last two decades the members of **NAECS/SDE** have continued to call attention to attitudes and practices which erode children's legal rights to enter public school and participate in a beneficial educational program. Dramatic changes in what children are expected to do upon entry and in kindergarten have resulted in well-intentioned interventions which are often inequitable, ineffective, and wasteful of limited public resources.

In 1987 the first edition of this position statement was published; it has been widely cited and continues to influence thinking. Unfortunately, the practices, which caused the members of the Association to become alarmed in the 1980's, continue—this in spite of a preponderance of evidence of their lack of benefit and even of harm to children. This update of the 1987 document has been prepared in response to requests from the membership and the early childhood field.

Classroom teachers continue to report that they have little or no part in decisions, which determine curriculum and instructional methodology. Instead, those decisions are made by administrators who are influenced by public demand for more stringent educational standards

continues on inside

PARTICIPATING STATES

Iowa Department of Education

Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Montana Office of Public Instruction

Nebraska Department of Education

North Carolina Office of Public Instruction

NAECS/SDE

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and the increased availability of commercial, standardized tests.

Additional pressure on kindergarten programs sometimes comes from primary teachers, who themselves face requirements for more effective instruction and higher pupil achievement. They argue that the kindergarten program should do more. In addition, a growing number of states and localities have raised the age of kindergarten eligibility, providing further evidence of changed expectations for kindergarten education and kindergarten children.

A number of highly questionable practices have resulted from the trend to demand more of kindergarten children. These practices include: 1) inappropriate uses of screening and readiness tests; 2) discouragement or outright denial of entrance for eligible children; 3) the development of segregated transitional classes for children deemed unready for the next traditional level of school; and 4) an increasing use of retention.

Two predominant considerations underlie these practices. The first is a drive to achieve homogeneity in instructional groupings. Some educators believe that instruction will be easier and more effective if the variability within the class is reduced. There is, however, no compelling evidence that children learn more or better in homogenous groupings. In fact, most of them learn more efficiently and achieve more satisfactory social/emotional development in mixed-ability groups.

The second is a well-intentioned effort to protect children from inappropriately high demands on their intellectual and affective abilities. When parents are counseled to delay a child's entry or when children are placed in "developmental" or "readiness" classes to prepare for kindergarten or "transitional" classes to prepare for first grade, it is often because the school program is perceived to be too difficult for some children. In this view, children must be made ready for the demands of the program, in contrast to tailoring the program to the strengths and needs of the children.

Delaying children's entry into school and/or segregating them into extra-year classes actually labels children as failures at the outset of their school experience. These practices are simply subtle forms of retention. Not only is there a preponderance of evidence that there is no academic benefit from retention in its many forms, but there also appear to be threats to the social-emotional development of the child subjected to such practices. The educational community can no longer afford to ignore the consequences of policies and practices which: 1) assign the burden of responsibility to the child, rather than the program; 2) place the child at risk of failure, apathy toward school, and demoralization; and 3) fail to contribute to quality early childhood education.

For several years, members of the association representing all sections of the country have observed with concern the persistence of practices which narrow the curriculum in kindergarten and primary education, constrict equal educational opportunity for some children, and curtail the exercise of professional responsibility of early childhood educators.

Therefore, NAECS/SDE calls for policymakers, educators, and all concerned about young children to use the summary principles and discussions which follow to guide and inform decisions about kindergarten entry and placement:

Summary of Principles for Kindergarten Entry and Placement

National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education

1. **Kindergarten teachers and administrators guard the integrity of effective, developmentally appropriate programs for young children...**
   ...they do not yield to pressure for acceleration of narrowly focused skill-based curricula or the enforcement of academic standards derived without regard for what is known about young children's development and learning.
2. **Children are enrolled in kindergarten based on their legal right to enter...**
   ...families are not counseled or pressured to delay entrance of their children for a year by keeping them at home or enrolling them in other programs. Rather, families are strongly encouraged to enroll age-eligible children.
3. **Kindergarten teachers and administrators are informed about assessment strategies and techniques and are involved responsibly in their use...**
   ...they do not defer assessment decisions solely to psychometricians and test publishers.
4. **Retention is rejected as a viable option for young children...**
   ...it is not perpetuated on the basis of false assumptions as to its educational benefit.
5. **Tests used at kindergarten entrance are valid, reliable, and helpful in initial planning and information-sharing with parents...**
   ...they are not used to create barriers to school entry or to sort children into what are perceived to be homogeneous groups.
6. **All children are welcomed—as they are—into heterogeneous kindergarten settings...**
   ...they are not segregated into extra-year programs prior to or following regular kindergarten.

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Discussion of Principle 1

Kindergarten teachers and administrators guard the integrity of effective, developmentally appropriate programs for young children...

...they do not yield to pressure for acceleration of narrowly focused skill-based curricula or the enforcement of academic standards derived without regard for what is known about young children's development and learning.

Most of the questionable entry and placement practices that have emerged in recent years have their genesis in concerns over children's capacities to cope with an increasingly inappropriate curriculum in the kindergarten. External pressures in recent decades have so changed the focus of the curriculum in kindergarten that it is often difficult to distinguish between curriculum and methodology in classrooms for young children and those of later elementary grades.

Several factors have interacted to bring about those changes. Research about the capabilities of young children has been misrepresented and misunderstood. A popular belief has developed that children are smarter now primarily because of exposure to television and because so many go to preschool. A rather large number of overzealous parents have also contributed to the problem by insisting that their children be "taught" more and by expecting these children to learn to read in kindergarten. This parental view of kindergarten has reinforced the notion that didactic methods of teaching (many of questionable value even for older elementary children) should be accepted practice in kindergarten.

Too often teachers are told, or they believe, that it is not enough to set the stage for learning by preparing a rich and varied environment and encouraging children to engage in activities which carry their development forward. In too many kindergartens, the core of rich creative experiences with real materials has now been replaced with abstract curriculum materials requiring pencil-and-paper responses. Often these are linked to tightly sequenced and often inappropriate grade-level lists of expected skill acquisition in each of the subject areas. Ironically, children who are ready to learn to read are more likely to advance as far as they are able in an active learning classroom.

Dramatic changes in what children are expected to do upon entry and in kindergarten have resulted in well-intentioned interventions which are often inequitable, ineffective, and wasteful of limited public resources.

(Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Goodlad & Anderson, 1987; Hills, 1987a; IRA & NAEYC, 1998; Kagan et al, 1995; Katz, 1991; NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 1991; Shore, 1998; Shipman, 1987; Snow et al, 1998)

Discussion of Principle 2

Children are enrolled in kindergarten based on their legal right to enter...

...families are not counseled or pressured to delay entrance of their children for a year by keeping them at home or enrolling them in other programs. Rather, families are strongly encouraged to enroll age-eligible children.

Serious negative consequences accompany the rising trend to discourage parents from enrolling their age-eligible children in kindergarten. The dilemma is that the very children being counseled out of school are the ones who, if provided a flexible appropriate kindergarten curriculum, could benefit the most. The "gift of time" that many parents have been persuaded to give children by delaying school entry can result instead in denying them opportunities for cognitive growth through social interaction with their age-mates. It also implies that children have failed at school even before they begin. By the end of the primary level, children whose kindergarten entry is delayed do not perform better than peers who enter on time. Further, children who enter late are disproportionately represented in referrals to special education. This means their access to special help is also delayed a year.

Public schools cannot ethically select some children who are eligible under the law and reject others. Children subjected to delayed entry disproportionately represent racial and linguistic minorities, low-income children, and males. Denial of entrance to school, blatant or subtle, increases the disparity between social classes and could be construed as a denial of a child's civil rights. It places the financial burden for alternative schooling on parents. This is an equity problem.

Curiously, states with quite different entry cutoff dates perceive the same problems. While there is some evidence that older children tend to do better initially, the differences due to age are small and disappear with time. The specific entry date is irrelevant and recent legislative action in several states to raise the entry age will not accomplish what is intended. The quality and appropriateness of the kindergarten curriculum should be the focus of the reform. Age is the only non-discriminatory entry criterion.

No matter where the kindergarten entry date is set, there will always be a younger group of children within a given classroom. It is both unfair and unreasonable to establish expectations for achievement on what the oldest children can do. Delaying entry has been shown to contribute to greater variation among children in the same class—in chronological age, size, motor

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ability, experiential backgrounds, and other learning characteristics.

Educators should be sensitive to and respectful of the wishes of some parents to postpone their children's initiation into the larger world of school. However, school personnel also have the responsibility to assure that parents do not make this decision based on anxiety over the suitability of the kindergarten program for their child. Educators have an important role to play in educating parents about the myths associated with perceived benefits of holding children out of school.

(Bellissimo et al, 1995; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Katz, 1991; Graue, 1993; Meisels, 1992; NAEYC, 1995; Shipman, 1987, Shepard & Smith, 1985; Shore, 1998; Smith & Shepard, 1987; Spitzer et al, 1995; West et al, 1993)

Discussion of Principle 3

Kindergarten teachers and administrators are informed about assessment strategies and techniques and are involved responsibly in their use...

...they do not defer assessment decisions solely to psychometricians and test publishers.

Assessment is a process of determining whether particular characteristics are present in an individual or a program and the amount or extent of them. Standardized tests are one form of measurement. Assessment can also be accomplished through teacher observation, checklists, rating scales, and questionnaires.

Because testing is so prevalent, many teachers are faced with challenges for which their training and experience have left them unprepared. Today's early childhood educators must be able to: 1) recommend appropriate measures to be used in the beginning of school years; 2) interpret and use the information which the measures produce; 3) communicate to other educators and parents what test information means about student progress; and 4) prevent and/or correct misuses of testing.

To fulfill these responsibilities requires that early childhood educators become informed about the functions of tests and measures, their properties, and the legitimate uses of test data. Tests, which fit one purpose adequately, may be totally unsuited to another. Most importantly, early educators must know about the various forms of assessment, which can supplement or replace test scores.

A number of highly questionable practices have resulted from the trend to demand more of kindergarten children.

These practices include:

1) **inappropriate uses of screening and readiness tests;**
2) **discouragement or outright denial of entrance for eligible children;**
3) **the development of segregated transitional classes for children deemed unready for the next traditional level of school; and**
4) **an increasing use of retention.**

Further, as children enrolling in school represent more diverse language and culture, new assessment responsibilities are placed upon educators at every level. *"For the optimal development and learning of all children, educators must accept the legitimacy of children's home language, respect and value the home culture, and promote and encourage the active support of all families."* (**NAEYC**, 1995, p.2)

As tests have increased in popularity, instances of their abuse have increased. Abuses occur when:

- Assessment tools are used for purposes for which they were not designed (e.g., screening tests used to diagnose a child's development);
- Assessment tools do not meet acceptable levels of quality (e.g., no reliability or validity studies are available);
- An assessment tool is used as the sole basis for a decision about placing a child in a specific educational program;
- An assessment tool or test determines curricular objectives;
- Test scores are used as a single measure of school and/or teacher effectiveness; and
- Teachers lack sufficient training and experience in the use of assessments.

(Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Hills, 1987b; Meisels, 1987; NAEYC, 1987; NAEYC, 1995; NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 1991; NEGP, 1998; Shepard, 1994; Shepard et al, 1998; Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, 1985)

Discussion of Principle 4

Retention is rejected as a viable option for young children...

...it is not perpetuated on the basis of false assumptions as to its educational benefit.

Retention policies should be highly suspect given the lack of demonstrated effectiveness and prevalent bias against certain groups of children. The current methodology used in selecting students for retention makes it impossible to predict accurately who will benefit. Pro-retention policies as a strategy for establishing rigorous academic standards are likely to be self-defeating. Lowered expectations developed by parents and teachers actually decrease the

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probability that retained children will attain their potential.

Although research does not support the practice of grade retention, many educators and parents do. It is true that teachers see children they have retained making progress. It is also true they have no opportunity to see how well the children might have progressed had they been promoted.

The vast majority of control-group studies, which are structured to measure this comparison, come down clearly on the side of promotion. Students recommended for retention but advanced to the next level end up doing as well as or better academically than non-promoted peers. Children who have been retained demonstrate more social regression, display more behavior problems, suffer stress in connection with being retained, and more frequently leave high school without graduating.

The term "ending social promotion" creates a climate that supports an increase in the practice of retaining children. Most schools are not employing less costly strategies that are proven to support children's achievement, thus avoiding social promotion. These include:

- high quality preschool;
- improving the quality of child-care settings;
- full-time kindergarten;
- lowered class-size;
- tutoring outside of class time;
- summer programs;
- after-school programs; and
- multiage grouping.

Ending conditions, which prevent all children from maximum learning, must be a priority for us all.

(CPRE, 1990; Cosden et al, 1993; MBE, 1990; Goodlad & Anderson, 1987; May & Welch, 1984; Meisels, 1992; Norton, 1983; Plummer, et al., 1987; Shepard & Smith, 1986; Smith & Shepard, 1987; Shepard & Smith, 1989; Shepard & Smith, 1990; USDE, 1999)

Discussion of Principle 5

Tests used at kindergarten entrance are valid, reliable, and helpful in initial planning and information-sharing with parents...

...they are not used to create barriers to school entry or to sort children into what are perceived to be homogeneous groups.

Kindergarten testing is a common practice in today's public schools. Unfortunately, screening and readiness tests are being used interchangeably to determine the educational fate of many young children before they enter kindergarten. Developmental screening tests broadly and briefly tap developmental domains and are designed primarily to predict future school success – screening to find children who, after further assessment, appear to be good candidates for selective programs. As such, they must contain predictive validity as well as the accepted standards for all tests of reliability, validity, sensitivity, and specificity. Screening procedures should include vision, hearing, and health assessments.

The educational community can no longer afford to ignore the consequences of policies and practices which: 1) assign the burden of responsibility to the child, rather than the program; 2) place the child at risk of failure, apathy toward school, and demoralization; and 3) fail to contribute to quality early childhood education.

Readiness tests, by definition and statistical design, do not predict outcomes and therefore cannot be substituted for such purposes. These tests assist teachers in making instructional decisions about individual children. Children who do poorly on readiness tests are likely to benefit the most from the kindergarten. The paradox is that if readiness tests are substituted for developmental screening measures, certain children are being channeled away from the regular classroom.

Testing children who have home languages other than English creates unique challenges. Care must be taken to use instruments and processes, which clearly identify what the child knows, and is able to do both in English and in the home language. It is not appropriate to make assumptions about proficiency in the home language based on level of proficiency in English. Careful assessment may reveal that the child could benefit from additional home-language development.

A major problem with kindergarten tests is that relatively few meet acceptable standards of reliability and validity. Based on several widely used tests, the probability of a child being misplaced is fifty percent—the same odds as flipping a coin. The burden of proof is on educational and testing professions to justify the decisions they make in the selection or creation of screening instruments. Otherwise, educators are left speculating about what the results mean. Flawed results lead to flawed decisions, wasted tax dollars, and misdiagnosed children.

Even when credible, appropriate tests are selected, kindergarten screening and developmental assessment are still uncertain undertakings because:

- Normal behavior of young children is highly variable.
- Young children are unsophisticated in generalizing from one situation to another and are novices in testing behaviors.

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- Young children may not be able to demonstrate what they know and can do clearly because of difficulties in reading, writing, responding, and in using pencils or other markers, or certain abstract symbols.
- Young children may not be able to demonstrate what they know and can do clearly because of differences in language and culture.
- Separation anxiety, the time of day the test is administered, and rapport with the examiner can all distort results, especially with young children.

Parents have a unique perspective about their child's development and learning history. For this reason, their knowledge about the behavior and attainments of their children is invaluable to teachers. Any full assessment of a child's progress must take the parent's information into account. Moreover, parents have a moral and legal right to be informed about the basis for educational decisions affecting their children.

Children entering school come from markedly different backgrounds. Assessment procedures must not penalize children at school entry for responses that have heretofore been appropriate for them or which they have not yet had a chance to develop. Screening and assessment does not substitute for an observant, competent, caring teacher and a responsive curriculum.

(Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Hargett, 1998; Hills, 1987b; Meisels, 1987; NAEYC, 1987; NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 1991; NEGP, 1998; Shepard, 1994; Shepard et al, 1998)

Discussion of Principle 6

All children are welcomed—as they are—into heterogeneous kindergarten settings...

...they are not segregated into extra-year programs prior to or following regular kindergarten.

The responsibility of the school is to accept children with the language, aptitudes, skills, and interests they bring. The function of the schools is to support the child's development and learning in all areas. The expectation is not that all children enter only with specific prerequisite skills.

What adjustments do schools need in order to make education more responsive to the needs of young children? Reducing class size, making the curriculum less abstract and therefore more related to children's conceptual development, insisting that only the most appropriately trained, competent, child-oriented teachers are placed in kindergarten programs, and assuring every child access to a high quality prekindergarten program are among better means to achieving the educational goal of success for all students.

The dramatic growth of extra-year programs represents an attempt by the educational system to cope with an escalating kindergarten curriculum and the varied backgrounds of entering children. However, these programs often increase the risk of failure for children who come to school with the educational odds against them. Selection and placement in "transitional," "developmental," or "readiness" classes often brand the children as failures in their own eyes and those of parents, peers, and teachers.

Children placed in segregated programs often encounter lowered expectations, have fewer positive peer role models for success and confidence, and lack access to regular curriculum. For all of these reasons, their future progress tends to be more limited and many of them continue in the slow track throughout their schooling.

"Regardless of what language children speak, they still develop and learn. Educators recognize that linguistically and culturally diverse children come to early childhood programs with previously acquired knowledge and learning based on the language used in their home. For young children the language of the home is the language they have used since birth, the language they use to make and establish meaningful communicative relationships, and the language they use to begin to construct their knowledge and test their learning." (NAEYC, 1995, p. 1)

Heterogeneous class groupings are more likely than are homogenous ones to encourage growth among children who come with home languages other than English or who are developing more slowly. Experiences within the regular classroom should be organized so that differences among children are valued rather than being viewed as a barrier to effective instruction. Flexible peer groupings, multiage and ungraded structures, and cooperative learning are some alternatives that can foster learning and self-esteem by valuing the gifts and talents of all children.

(Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Goodlad & Anderson, 1987; Gredler, 1984; Katz et al, 1990; May & Welch, 1984; Meisels, 1992; Nye et al, 1994; Oakes, 1985; Robinson, 1990; Robinson & Wittebols, 1986; Shepard & Smith, 1990; Slavin, 1986)

A Call to Action

The primary consideration should be what is best for young children, not institutions, politicians, or professionals. Children do not benefit from retention or delayed entry or extra-year classes. The case has been made that children are placed in double jeopardy when they are denied, on highly questionable premises, the same educational opportunities as their peers.

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Belief in the pure maturational viewpoint underlies many of the deleterious practices described in this paper. The adult belief that children unfold on an immutable timetable, however appealing, cannot be over-generalized to intellectual, social, linguistic, and emotional development. A responsive, success-oriented kindergarten curriculum and a well-trained teacher are bound to have a powerful effect on young children's learning. Children come to school as competent, naturally motivated learners. One of the school's critical responsibilities is to ensure that these characteristics are maintained and strengthened, not destroyed.

The issue is not whether to keep children with age-mates (Heterogeneous multiage grouping can stimulate and support children's development). It is whether we can continue to uphold practices and program predicated on failure. Failure by any name does not foster success for any students.

What adjustments do schools need in order to make education more responsive to the needs of young children? Reducing class size, making the curriculum less abstract and therefore more related to children's conceptual development, insisting that only the most appropriately trained, competent, child-oriented teachers are placed in kindergarten programs, and assuring every child access to a high quality prekindergarten program are among better means to achieving the educational goal of success for all students.

Limited federal, state, and local resources are being used inappropriately as a result of well-intentioned but misdirected policies. However, simply to stop retention and extra-year classes will not assure success for all children. *NAECS/SDE* recommends that attention and resources be diverted from ineffective policies and directed toward seeking long-term lasting cures for the ills of the kindergarten/ primary curriculum

Limited federal, state, and local resources are being used inappropriately as a result of well-intentioned but misdirected policies. However, simply to stop retention and extra-year classes will not assure success for all children. **NAECS/SDE** recommends that attention and resources be diverted from ineffective policies and directed toward seeking long-term lasting cures for the ills of the kindergarten/primary curriculum.

A consensus is needed among the educational community and families that only those practices beneficial to young children will be permitted. We can have equitable, excellent, and economical public education for all of the nation's kindergarten children.

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